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Never Forget

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At the Florida Holocaust Museum, Heuman employs artifacts like a railroad boxcar that transported Jews to concentration camps so that people can better grasp the human scale of one of history's deadliest genocides.

As the child of Holocaust survivors, Harry Heuman '69 teaches children how simple intolerance and apathy can lead to unimaginable suffering.

Story and photos by PAM WINDSOR

A believer in the power of critical thinking, Harry Heuman '69 has spent a lifetime asking questions and challenging others to do the same. The approach served him well throughout a career in urban/regional planning and land development, and he's finding it an effective way to share lessons from one of the darkest times in human history and make them relevant today.

Heuman is a volunteer tour guide at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg. The museum, one of the largest in the country, was the vision of St. Petersburg businessman Walter P. Loebenberg, who fled Nazi Germany in 1939. Numerous special and permanent exhibits, displays, timelines and photos help tell the story of the six million Jews and five million others who were killed.

As a guide, Heuman often works with young people, describing what happened during the 1930s and '40s, when Germany began persecuting those of the Jewish faith. It's a story close to his heart. His mother and father were Holocaust survivors.

He uses old photos, documents and artifacts like an old railroad boxcar, similar to ones used to transport his parents and others to the concentration camps, to show what can happen when one group of people targets another because of their differences and no one intervenes. He relates it to bullying, something teenagers and young adults are all too familiar with today, as he talks about the dangers of blindly following the crowd.

"Bullying has become much too pronounced in our society," he explains, noting that while it's been around throughout our history, technology has made bullying even easier today. "It's something people can hide behind with electronic or digital media."

He points out that the Nazis targeted not only Jews but other minority groups like homosexuals and the disabled. Six million Jews and five million others were killed during the Holocaust.

"These are average people working at grocery stores and bakeries," Heuman says. "They are doctors and professors, mothers, children playing, just normal people. But they were different because Hitler and a lot of other people decided that a religious group should be picked on, then persecuted.

"This is how you begin to educate people," Heuman adds, "to help them realize that this happened and — 70, 80 years later — it's still happening in some places in the world."

He encourages young people to pay attention to current events, as well as look into their own lives, their own neighborhoods and their own schools to see where people are being shunned or ostracized because they're different.

Heuman presents the Anne Frank Humanitarian Award to high school student Emily Molinowski for her volunteer work with special needs students in her community.

"I get them to think about what's going on in the world today." Heuman points to other genocides that have occurred even since the Holocaust, encouraging them to think about their role in society and consider whether they want to be a victim, a perpetrator or a bystander.

"Thinking critically, what would you do?" he asks museum visitors. "What would you do if you were in charge of the world when the issue in Rwanda happened, when 800,000 people died between tribes?"

Although many relatives Heuman never knew died during the Holocaust, his parents survived. The museum has one of the few remaining railroad boxcars used to carry men, women and children to concentration camps. While many died at the camps, others never survived the trip.

"I know my parents went on quite a few trips in these boxcars to different camps, let alone millions of other people," Heuman says. "There was no air conditioning, no windows and no bathrooms. People took care of their natural priorities standing in place. They died in place, vertically."

His mother was liberated from Auschwitz by Russian troops, his father from Dachau by the Americans. Although it was a chaotic time in post-war Germany, his mother was able to find his father, and they reunited. Heuman was born the next year in a DP (displaced persons) camp. In 1947, the family immigrated to the United States.

"We came to this country on the converted troop carrier, the *S.S. Ernie Pyle.* It was my mother, my father, me, a baby carriage, a straw trunk, a wooden trunk and my father's violin."

That violin, now on display at the museum, helps tell part of his family's story. As a young man, Heuman's father played the instrument to put himself through medical school. His original violin disappeared when he, like so many others, was stripped of all his possessions before being sent to the concentration camps. When the war was over, Heuman's father was given a replacement violin by an American GI. Playing it helped him cope with the loss of many of his family members.

Among the items on display at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg is a violin that an American GI gave to Heuman's father after he was liberated from Dachau. Playing it helped his father cope with the loss of many of his family members.

The Heumans ended up in the small town of Pavilion, N.Y., where his father — after getting the required training and license to become a doctor in the U.S. — opened his own practice. They were the only Jewish family in town, and Heuman remembers even then experiencing anti-Semitism. "I endured some discrimination at that time. I remember symbols being painted on our house."

"Knowledge of the Holocaust wasn't very prevalent in school studies or the newspaper in the '50s and '60s," he adds.

His parents valued education, and when it came time for Heuman to go to high school they sent him away, interestingly enough, to an Episcopalian boarding school in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

"Even though I was a good Jewish boy, it was a High Episcopalian, religious-oriented school, but it had a quality education. So, I went away, and I learned a lot. I learned a lot about Christianity, and the basis of it, and got very high marks in religious studies because it was very intriguing to me."

The school prepared him well to apply at a number of well-respected colleges. He chose Illinois Wesleyan University. He entered as a pre-med student, thinking he might become a doctor like his father, but discovered "something just didn't work for me in the sciences." He changed his major to sociology and political science and from that point on, he says, Wesleyan gave him a wonderful foundation that has served him throughout his life.

He remembers reading a book for class called *The Urban Complex* written by Robert C. Weaver, the first Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the first African American appointed to a cabinet position. He was riveted by the subject matter and knew he'd found his chosen profession. It laid the groundwork for what would become a long and successful career.

It was also during this time that he met a mentor who helped shape his future, Sociology Professor Maxwell Pape. He credits Pape with providing the foundation to be willing to ask the difficult questions and challenge the status quo.

"Dr. Pape was constantly challenging me to compare and contrast, to explain my point. Sometimes maybe he disagreed with me just to see what I would say. I don't know. I'll never know, and that's okay," he says with a smile.

After graduating in 1969, Heuman went to work in Troy, N.Y., before later going to graduate school at Texas A&M. He recalls very early on in grad school abiding by that tendency to ask

questions and take a stand. He remembers one incident that could have gone either way, when a professor in a “Methods and Techniques” class said something that didn’t ring true.

“I raised my hand and said, ‘I disagree.’ Then I argued and presented my point.”

A couple of days later, that same professor called his name and asked him to stand up. Heuman admits he did so, with a little bit of trepidation.

“The professor said, ‘Mr. Heuman, you are correct. I’m revising my lesson.’”

After grad school, Heuman went to work in California, then Illinois, before taking a job in Hillsborough County, Fla., in 1984.

During the late 1980s, an older couple came into Heuman’s office to discuss an issue involving their mentally challenged son living in a local group home. Heuman noticed numbers tattooed on the man’s arm and recognized them immediately as serial numbers from Auschwitz.

During the conversation that followed, he learned the couple had been at the same displaced persons camp in Germany.

“They remembered this young doctor, his beautiful wife (my mother) and a young baby immigrating to the United States. They remembered me as a baby.”

Heuman would go on to volunteer with a local group that helped people with disabilities like their son.

“Again, they are people who were innocently shunned from society or had different attributes or whatever, but they’re people who love life. And I have an affinity for that.”

Heuman has worked with a variety of groups that help others. And even before he became a docent at the museum, he volunteered at area schools to share the history of the Holocaust. He believes he has a responsibility to ensure the world never forgets what happened.

Sandy Mermelstein, senior educator at the Florida Holocaust Museum, believes Heuman’s role, and that of other second-generation survivors, is critical.

“The Holocaust was such a vast crime. It’s difficult for people to grasp the magnitude of the murder of 11 million human beings. But we can understand the life of a single person. So, when Harry talks about his parents, he is retelling their story. This is what happened to them. He is a real person, his parents were real people. It’s not a statistic, it’s not a number.”

She adds that for young people, especially, it’s so important to be able to ask real-life questions.

“The kids can ask him what it was like growing up, do you remember being in a displaced persons camp, did your parents ever talk about it, how do you think that made you different from other children?”

Heuman hopes by answering those questions, he can encourage them to ask others of themselves and the people around them. “The world is not going to be as easy in future decades as it was in the past. For my children and my grandchildren and everyone else, you have to ask the hard questions.”

“It’s important to me and many others to make sure the world never forgets what happened,” he says.